

Firefighting the Czech way: Sigma's UK bond

by Maria Hughes

Ludvík Sigmund started making wooden pumps in 1868 in Lutín, a village near Olomouc, in Moravia, in what was then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His sons Jan and František took over in 1894 followed by Jan's three sons – another Jan and František plus Miroslav, the youngest.

In 1922 the trade name Sigma was registered and Neptune's trident adopted as its trademark. By 1924 the firm had an office and a shop in Prague managed by František junior.

In the 1930s Sigma traded with 24 countries, had two subsidiaries in France and Yugoslavia and employed 900 people. The company provided a canteen, social centre, cinema, sports and other facilities for its staff.

From the early days there was an emphasis on training for apprentices; seven in 1917 doubled to 15 in 1920 and by 1930 there were 126 contracted apprenticeships. From the mid 1930s a three-year group training scheme was established; in 1935-36 there were 40 trainees in the first year and 29 in the second. The company also had research laboratories.

In 1935 Sigmund Brothers established a new company, Chema, which specialised in gas warfare equipment that was supplied to the Czechoslovak army. By 1937 it employed a further 600 staff and had developed bomb-proof shelters equipped with air conditioning and special filters to eliminate poisonous gas, as well as other defensive equipment. The Sigmund family owned all the patents.

A letter from the Czechoslovak Legation in London to the Home Office, dated June 1938, enquired whether its Air Raid Precaution Department would be willing to co-operate with a group of Czech experts based in Lutín that were engaged in matters relating to air raids. An internal response from the Foreign Office raised no objection but stated "we do not wish to emphasise Anglo-Czech co-operation at present, as the Czechs would certainly exploit any signs of it for political purposes.

"On the other hand we have sent missions to study air raid precautions in Germany and should presumably be prepared to give the Germans certain facilities in return. This should be sufficient reply to any possible criticism of technical co-operation with the Czechs in this matter."

As war loomed, the family devised a strategy for diversifying abroad: Jan, the eldest, stayed in Moravia while František went to France. Following the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, Ludvík's grandson Jan, now company director, resisted pressure for Sigma to support their interests.

He was arrested in 1940 and executed by the Gestapo in 1942 as part of the reprisals for the assassination of Heydrich. The Czech firm was confiscated by the German authorities and used to manufacture components for tanks, submarines, aircraft and cars.

The company was nationalised in 1945 by presidential decree as part of a key industry



Above, 'For pumps ask Sigmund's' the Sigma factory in Lutín near Olomouc and right, a UK advertisement for the fire pumps



and continued under the name of Sigma. The Czechoslovak state undertook a legal battle with the Sigmund family about ownership of the UK subsidiary and especially over the Sigma trademark. This lasted many years and was finally settled out of court.

Sigma pumps for Britain

In 1937 Miroslav came to England. During this visit he registered a UK subsidiary, Sigmund Pumps (GB) Ltd with an English sales manager and director. He also pursued a British government initiative to improve employment opportunities in depressed areas such as south Wales and the north east.

Having visited both areas with a view to establishing a factory for manufacturing

mobile fire-fighting units, Miroslav settled upon the Team Valley Estate, Gateshead, which had a skilled labour force.

In his proposal, engines for the pumps on this equipment would be purchased from Morris Motors, owned by Lord Nuffield. He then approached the Nuffield Trust committee which advised the Treasury in making loans to industrial undertakings in designated special areas.

Several fire-fighting trailers were brought from Czechoslovakia and demonstrated to the London Fire Brigade.

A tender for 1,000 units was submitted to the Home Office on the basis that the machinery and designs for production would be supplied from Czechoslovakia along with key Czech staff.

'Miroslav Sigmund continued his career in England...holding more than 50 patents'

Miroslav moved to England in 1938. Jan provided support from the Czech factory and managed to ship essential machines together with technical documentation, experienced technicians and other Czech staff, including a cook. The last shipment left Lutín by train on March 15, 1939.

In keeping with family tradition, the English firm offered an apprenticeship scheme which according to one of their trainees was "extremely innovative and well ahead of its time." It included learning off the job at college as well as being trained at the factory.

During the first five years of a seven-year apprenticeship, studies covered the strength and properties of materials, engineering drawing and design, machines and hydraulics. The final two years included part-time study to gain a higher national certificate. In all about 300 apprentices (aged 14 when they started) received training from 1941 to 1948.

War-time production

By January 1940 Britain was well equipped with fire-fighting appliances. The company continued to produce stirrup pumps and had delivered 68,000 by the end of that year despite difficulties with the supply of materials. By the end of the war, Sigmund Pumps had supplied 8,000 trailer-mounted fire pumps and 800,000 stirrup pumps.

Sigmund Pumps also assisted the Ministry of Supply by setting up in Gateshead a facility for the production of the Bren gun. This was made possible by a group of former employees of Zbrojovka, the Czech government armaments factory in Brno, whose former commercial director, Dr Eduard Outrata, was a member of the Czechoslovak government in exile.

In the summer of 1940 there were long negotiations with the Custodian of Enemy Property. The Ministry of Labour and the War Office did not know whether to regard the Czechs as enemies or allies. All the Czechs had been vetted by the security service and their dossiers examined by the Aliens War Auxiliary Service Department before they were granted permission to work in Britain.

As one frustrated official observed "we cannot admit that the Czechs should not be employed on the Bren gun. That gun is their creation." By October 1941, 40% of its production in Britain was dependent on the Gateshead factory.

Towards the end of the war, in November 1944 the Czechs working on the Bren gun received a note. "You are hereby informed that the Czech Ministry of National Defence intends to direct you, under existing Czechoslovak laws, decrees and regulations, into the home armaments' industry as soon as it is possible to resume production in the armament factories in the liberated territory

of Czechoslovakia. You are therefore reminded that you are not permitted to enter into an engagement abroad which would be incompatible with the legal obligations imposed on you."

In June 1945 the Foreign Office sent a request to the Czechoslovak Embassy in London that five Czechs should be allowed to stay on for one year but the men themselves felt they could not stay.

Post-war developments

After the war, the Gateshead company produced pumps for 5,000 Green Goddesses used by the auxiliary fire service. Their main role was to pump large quantities of water from lakes, rivers and canals in support of fire services throughout the UK.

Miroslav Sigmund continued his career in England as a creative engineer, holding more than 50 patents. In 1991 he was invited to visit the Sigma works at Lutín and helped the company adapt to the post-communist era.

His niece, Jitka Paterson Sigmund (daughter of his brother Jan) came to England in December 1945 and many years later became the first membership secretary of the British Czech and Slovak Association (1991-2004).

Her memories of both the Czech and British family businesses led me to dig further into the records held in the National Archives at Kew.